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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Renewal Institute for Practicing Educators, a staff development program designed specifically for rural teachers. The institute is a state-funded cooperative effort between school districts and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. It provides tuition-free spring and summer workshops for rural teachers in science, math, and language arts. The focus of each Renewal Institute teaching program is determined by a steering committee of local teachers, administrators, and university faculty. The institute's summer 1987 language arts program is described with particular emphasis on the cooperative aspect of the program and the high degree of teacher involvement. Obstacles and incentives for teachers to implement workshop ideas are also described and discussed in detail. Among the factors influencing change in the classroom are: money, administrators, colleagues, parents, students, and professional self-improvement. The paper concludes that rural teachers and teaching positions differ from their urban and suburban counterparts in several aspects, both positive and negative. Rural staff development programs lack some incentives often associated with effective change in larger schools, including external pressure to try new approaches, organizational structures conducive to change, and ongoing technical and resource support. The close-knit quality of rural schools, on the other hand, provides a different set of advantages that can be used by staff developers. Contains 14 references. (TES)

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Tapping the Strengths of Rural Schools:

An Exemplary Staff Development Model

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Abstract

What are the obstacles and incentives to implementation of staff development in rural schools? A cooperative staff development program is described and recommendations are provided for staff development based on the unique circumstances of rural schools.

Tapping the Strengths of Rural Schools: A Cooperative Staff Development Model

The Renewal Institute for Practicing Educators is a cooperative staff development project designed to meet the special needs of rural teachers. The Institute, which is a state-funded school district/university staff development program at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, provides tuition-free spring and summer workshops for practicing teachers in science, math, and language arts. This rural staff development project was the recipient of the 1987 Christa McAuliffe Showcase for Excellence Award from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in the category of strengthening relationships between universities and school districts.

In this article, we will briefly review the characteristics and needs of rural teachers and describe the Renewal Institute model which was designed to meet these special needs. We will describe the obstacles and incentives for instructional improvement that participants experienced during the implementation phase. Finally, we will discuss the implications of this experience for other rural staff development projects.

Characteristics and Needs of Rural Teachers

The special problems of staff development in rural schools are seldom addressed, despite the fact that as of 1980 almost two thirds of all school districts, half of all public schools, and one third of practicing teachers were located in rural areas of the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1980; DeYoung, 1987). While most studies of

educational change have focused on teachers in centralized urban and suburban schools, what works in these settings may not transfer to rural schools.

Rural teachers differ from their urban and suburban counterparts in a number of ways, including their perceptions of their teaching situations and the types of occupational incentives that keep them on the job (DeYoung, 1987). On the one hand, smallness has some advantages. The National School Board Association (1987) points out several factors that its members can highlight when recruiting teachers to rural areas: a low pupil-teacher ratio, variety in teaching assignments, a great degree of autonomy, the chance to be a part of a small close-knit team of teachers, and high parental and community involvement in the schools. Other factors also encourage the success of school improvement efforts. Rural teachers generally have a long-term commitment to their teaching positions, as well as personal ties with and credibility in the community. They may also be easier to work with once the change process has started because their workplace is smaller and more conducive to promoting necessary staff interactions (Huberman and Crandall, 1983).

Personal and professional isolation is the most frequently cited disadvantage of rural schools (Massey & Crosby, 1983). Rural teachers are more likely than their urban or suburban counterparts to be "one of a kind" in a district or school, e.g., <u>the</u> junior high science teacher, rather than a member of a department. They may well teach several subjects in addition to coaching or supervising extracurricular activities and are likely to be moved to other teaching assignments when class sizes or other conditions change. As a result, they often teach in areas outside of their greatest competence and comfort. And, when a teaching situation is uncomfortable, the rural teacher

often has few alternatives. These problems are compounded by the lack of central office staff available as consultants for curriculum development or instructional supervision in most of their districts. Their building principals are frequently consumed with the tasks of administration and assign staff development for effective, experienced teachers a low priority on a list of more pressing obligations. Thus, rural teachers are left much to themselves to look for solutions to problems and ways of acquiring new skills or training (Killian and Byrd, 1988).

In such circumstances, teachers often attempt to overcome the isolation by forming informal networks with other teachers, both within and beyond their schools. The concept of collegiality, especially when paired with experimentation, has been shown to be an important characteristic in the implementation of professional development activities in other settings (Little, 1982). Sparks' finding (1986) that peer observation and support was more effective than coaching by a trainer in boosting the effectiveness of a normal professional development activity also lends credence to the notion that teacher-helping-teacher as an effective staff development model.

The Renewal Institute

The Renewal Institute includes three strands: math, science, and language arts. The focus of each strand is determined by steering committees comprising local teachers and administrators as well as university faculty. The Institute's director appoints committee members on the basis of geographic representation as well as on recommendations from local educators. Workshop instructors are drawn from content areas in the College of Liberal Arts (e.g., English, mathematics, biology, etc.) and from the teaching methods areas in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. In the fall, these instructors

go out to the classrooms of participants for follow-up observation and feedback about implementation of workshop content.

While the Renewal Institute includes three content areas, the researchers' participation in the Institute delivery and follow-up were limited to the language arts strand. Thus we limit our generalizations in this article to that group.

Participants. The Language Arts participants from spring and summer workshops of 1987 were twenty-seven elementary teachers, including several special education teachers and reading teachers. A "typical" participant was female, married, the mother of two, and had taught for about twelve years. She had lived in the rural area where she was currently employed for most of her life and had completed her college work at the university where she was taking the present course. A record of prior voluntary involvement in workshops, graduate courses, and attendance at professional meetings was characteristic of these teachers. Regardless of the level of their commitment, however, these teachers were functioning with some handicaps. Their rural schools tended to be small, often with a single teacher at each grade level, and traditionally have had limited budgets for professional development activities.

The Language Arts Program. Workshop topics were selected by the steering committee of teachers, administrators, and university faculty based on their perceptions of teachers' needs and interests. Topics included the development of literacy, writing across the curriculum, and computers in the language arts. Though the focus of each workshop was different, central themes common to all were the integration of reading and writing skills and the development of critical thinking ability. Workshop activities were planned to help

teachers make the transition from discussing change on campus to actually doing things differently in their classrooms. Bridging activities included journal writing, observation in other teachers' classrooms, and panel discussions with teachers who had had experiences in implementing similar curricular changes. Teachers focused on the planning and refining of projects for use in their classrooms.

During fall semester, university instructors visited participants at their rural school sites to discuss what progress they were making with implementing workshop content. Prior to these visits, instructors called teachers to ask what they might bring or prepare that would be beneficial. What teachers wanted varied from software and print material from the Renewal Institute resource room to requests for the instructors to demonstrate a certain technique by actually teaching a lesson in the participant's classroom. Almost all participants requested that faculty observe and provide feedback about their instruction, and they tried to schedule visits during times followed by lunch or a prep period so that there was opportunity for conversation.

During these visits to classrooms, instructors asked several teachers whether they would be willing to share their experiences with the next year's Institute participants. These volunteers became resource people who participated in panel discussions and also allowed new participants to observe them in the classroom.

In the course of conducting and evaluating workshop presentation and follow-up activities, we asked the teachers involved to share their reasons for participating, their reactions to the usefulness of workshop content, and their perceptions of the obstacles and incentives for putting what they

learned into action. This feedback, which is described in the next section, provides insight into the special needs and strengths of rural teachers and into the process by which staff development projects can best be tailored to their special circumstances.

Obstacles and Incentives for Staff Development

Journal entries, surveys and interviews at various points in the Institute cycle gave us insights about the impact that a variety of people and conditions had on teachers' incentives and ability to implement workshop content (Killian & Byrd, 1988). The factors which affected change were often a double-edged sword, capable of both helping and hindering change at the same time, as we can see in the following categories of obstacles and incentives gleaned from participants' comments.

Money. The lack of money was the most frequently reported obstacle, consistent with the budget crisis and cutbacks in the rural districts where participants were employed. Lack of money had its greatest impact on the purchasing of hardware and software and on acquisition of new textbooks or trade books for classroom libraries. But because these teachers were so accustomed to adverse financial conditions, they were often philosophical about the lack of funds and creative in finding ways to support their programs, using everything from book-club bonuses to money raised by parent-teacher organizations to purchase necessary supplies, trade books and software.

In a very different context, money was also a positive factor. Many participants indicated that the university's tuition waiver had provided an incentive for their participation in the workshops. But while this waiver made the Institute attractive, participants' records of prior voluntary

involvement in professional improvement suggest that the tuition savings was not the primary motivator. As Mann (1984-1985) observes in his assessment of the effect of financial incentives in the Impact II program: it's not the small grants themselves that make a difference. The real incentive is the network of social and professional support that the grantees are drawn into, networks that put interested teachers in touch with others like themselves (p. 44).

Administrators. Much of the research on change in schools has supported the notion that the role of the building principal is critical in implementation, a finding that has resulted in the rapid development of inservice training for principals (Fullan, 1985). The situation that these rural teachers faced was much different than that in the large, centralized school districts where most of the studies of change have been conducted. These teachers were the initiators of the change in their classrooms. They voluntarily took the coursework they needed to feel comfortable with the content and then went back to their classrooms where they fine-tuned the project, often with no other support than feedback from a colleague, parents or students. The unit of change for these teachers was the classroom, not the building. Though sometimes the changes made by an Institute participant might "catch on" in other classrooms, this extension was not planned.

When we asked teachers to rate how supportive their administrators had been of their efforts, most characterized them as supportive. But when they were asked to describe how their administrators had supported them, their responses did not reflect what has traditionally been associated with administrative support of implementation. Support in the minds of these rural teachers required only that an administrator not impede their efforts: "I've

been around so long--he trusts me to know what I'm doing." "As long as I don't ask for money, he'll let me try anything." Of those who characterized their principals as supportive, only about a quarter described active involvement. In such cases, the principals' efforts were most likely to have resulted in getting the teacher money or resources for computers and gifted programs, areas where there was some external pressure (e.g., from state initiatives or parents) to implement change.

It is important to recall here our earlier profile of the "typical" Institute participant. These teachers were experienced, effective professionals, held in high esteem by students, parents and administrators in their rural communities (Killian and Byrd, 1988). It is not surprising, then, that a mutual respect for one another's territory and skills would be apparent between the teachers and their principals. Principals respected the teachers' autonomy and deferred to their expertise about curriculum. Teachers understood that their principals had many competing pressures for their attention and energy. They welcomed moral support or praise from their administrators whenever it came, but when it did not, they went on without it.

Parents and Students. One of the most positive characteristics of rural teaching is the close relationship between the community and the school (Massey and Crosby, 1983). The participants in the Institute were concerned at all phases of implementation with the reaction of parents and students to the changes in the classroom. Almost without exception student and parent reaction was positive, even beyond teachers' expectations, and served to validate their efforts. Their enthusiasm often resulted in comments to principals and school board members, which led in turn to administrative praise for the teacher. Enrollment in subsequent Institute courses by other

teachers within a building has been high, suggesting that the administrator's remarks may have generated some gentle pressure for other teachers to take on professional self-improvement projects.

Colleagues. Participants perceived the majority of other teachers in their buildings much as they perceived their principal, "supportive" in that they did not impede the change: "If I don't affect what's going on in her classroom, she doesn't care what I'm doing over here." When asked how the others in the building had reacted to her drastically changed approach to reading, a first grade teacher said, "They're not interested--I don't talk about it much." Since she had rated her colleagues as supportive on her survey, we asked her about the discrepancy. Her explanation was that other teachers had been willing to shift recess times to allow for her sustained silent reading program and had been willing to loan her extra copies of books. Thus, a colleague didn't have to be supportive of the change in order to be perceived as supportive of the teacher.

When participants gave specific examples of collegial support, they almost always referred to a single other teacher, either within their building or outside, who helped them to maintain their enthusiasm and, in some cases, to come up with alternatives when things were not working well. In-class collegiality emerged as a strong theme during the workshops, but was not sustained once teachers returned to their schools in the fall. An exception was the few teachers who continued to see each other at local meetings of the Reading Council and the Council of Teachers of English. However, in follow-up surveys and interviews, the desire to maintain contacts with colleagues in the Institute was clear. The single most requested follow-up activity was a reunion of class participants. It would seem that having shared a supportive

environment, many teachers found themselves even more aware of their isolation than before.

Professional Self-Improvement. Professional self-improvement motives emerged as the strongest incentive to taking Institute courses and to implementing change. In this respect, our rural teachers were just like those in other research on what motivates teachers to engage in staff development: they become involved in the process because they wanted to become better teachers (Guskey, 1986). In describing their own internal motivation, several of the interview sample referred to their commitment to the community in explaining why they persisted in their efforts despite obstacles. One veteran of twenty-six years said, "I can't just wait until the tax referendum passes. I was born and raised in this community and I'm going to see that these kids get the best education I can give them." In our rural sample such teachers seem capable of ensuring their own professional growth with a bare minimum of external incentives. Still, they thrived in conditions of collegiality with like-minded peers and were effusively grateful when active support or recognition came from administrators and other sources.

Implications for Staff Developers

Feedback from participants in the Renewal Institute project sheds some light on how the process of instructional improvement takes place under the unique circumstances of rural schools. From our study of these volunteer participants in a cooperative school district/university staff development project, we have drawn several conclusions which have implications for staff development planning in rural schools.

Cooperation. The fact that money is tight and that central office staff developers are not likely to be available in rural schools in the near future

makes it essential that staff development in rural settings be a cooperative effort. The effort described here was a liaison of state, university and local teachers but other combinations are equally plausible. One promising cooperative link is with the local or regional units responsible for planning inservice activities. A few of our participants have either volunteered or been invited by their principals to share some of their experience in the Institute with colleagues in their buildings. On these occasions, some have come back to the Renewal Institute collections for videotapes or other materials that have helped them to spark the interest of colleagues. In other districts principals and superintendents have shown a willingness to cooperate by allowing participants to use inservice or professional days to visit colleagues in other schools, thus helping them to sustain the support systems that had formed during the workshop phase. For these teachers, administrators already play a cooperative role in encouraging participation in the Institute and in supporting teachers' efforts once they are back in the classroom. To expand this cooperation, future cycles of the Institute include plans for participants to invite their principals to a half-day informational workshop and panel presentation.

Transferability. However it is presented, the delivery of content should be as practical and self-sustaining as possible, since teachers will often feel isolated in their teaching situations. Activities that promote transfer include panel discussions with teachers who have already implemented change, and visits to classrooms where the practices are in place. These activities are easier to accomplish and share with colleagues, as well as more immediately relevant, if participants take the course concurrent with their teaching rather than over the summer.

Adaptation of other models. Many staff development strategies that work well in centralized school districts will not transfer well to the rural setting, but others will--particularly those that focus on the teacher as staff developer. An example of such a project is the use of voluntary discussion seminars described by Sullivan (1987). This approach, which involved teachers, university, and community in discussion of journal articles, helped to promote collegiality while keeping participants current on the latest educational issues. Teachers' classes were covered once a month by volunteers from the university so that discussion groups could take place during school hours. This kind of inexpensive, collegial approach to professional growth could be quite effective in a rural setting where, instead of involving teachers from several schools within a district, it could be open to teachers from several small districts within a short driving distance.

Teacher empowerment. Rural schools are illustrative of the teacher as an autonomous and powerful agent in school change. Those who would encourage change in rural schools would do well to start with teachers whose own efforts at self-improvement have already made them excellent informal curriculum leaders. Freeing such teachers to plan and provide small group inservice and follow-up coaching to colleagues would cost districts little or no more money than the current practice of importing experts for one-shot peptalks or inservice smorgasbords. Models like the Staples High School program and the Teacher Leadership Projects described by Maeroff (1988, p. 103) promote cooperation between administration and teachers in planning and providing inservice and could be adapted to meet the needs of rural schools.

Summary

Rural schools are not disappearing. If anything, as Darling-Hammond notes, the small school's strengths are more apparent than ever in light of the recent research on effective schools. We now have a decade's worth of solid research showing that smaller schools are more effective in terms of producing student achievement, building student self-confidence, and reducing violence and vandalism (Darling-Hammond in D.B. Strouther, 1988, p. 450).

Instructional improvement in these smaller schools will not take place under the same conditions or with the same support that has been documented in the many studies of change and staff development in large, consolidated districts. The present study identified and discussed the obstacles and incentives to instructional improvement perceived by a group of rural elementary teachers who participated in a cooperative staff development project. Major obstacles included a lack of financial resources within their school districts, an already crowded curriculum, and isolation from peers with similar interests. Professional self-esteem seemed to be the most prevalent incentive throughout the project, though collegiality among participants was an equally strong theme during the workshop phase of the project. Once back in their classrooms, teachers reported that interest and enthusiasm from students and parents were a major source of support. Encouragement from administrators varied greatly among participants; it seemed to serve as a support to successful implementation but rarely drove the process.

Our findings would seem to support the hypotheses of others that rural staff development lacks some of the incentives often associated with effective change processes in these larger schools, including some external pressure to try a new approach, an organizational structure conducive to the change, and

ongoing technical and resource support (Fullan, 1985). On the other hand, the close-knit quality of rural schools and the communities they serve and the autonomy of teachers within these settings provide a different set of advantages than can be capitalized on by staff developers.

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